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*BY THE SAME WRITER*

SHORT POEMS

THOROUGHFARES

WHIN

NEIGHBOURS

BATTLE

FRIENDS

VERSE TALES

FIRES

LIVELIHOOD

DRAMATIC POEMS

KESTREL EDGE

KRINDLESYKE

BORDERLANDS

DAILY BREAD

STONEFOLDS

I HEARD A SAILOR





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TORONTO



# I HEARD A SAILOR

BY

WILFRID GIBSON

MACMILLAN AND CO., LIMITED  
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1925

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**UPB**

TO  
JOCELYN





## CONTENTS

|   | PAGE |
|---|------|
| LUCK . . . . .                          | 3    |
| THE ANNIVERSARY . . . . .               | 4    |
| THE WHITE WHIPPET . . . . .             | 5    |
| THE NEW OILSKINS . . . . .              | 6    |
| THE SACRIFICE . . . . .                 | 7    |
| THE WRECK . . . . .                     | 8    |
| THE COLT . . . . .                      | 9    |
| THE BLIND-WORM . . . . .                | 10   |
| ADRIFT . . . . .                        | 11   |
| NED NIXON AND HIS MAGGIE . . . . .      | 13   |
| DEAD MAN'S BROW . . . . .               | 15   |
| THE ROSE . . . . .                      | 17   |
| NEW MOON—I . . . . .                    | 18   |
| NEW MOON—II . . . . .                   | 19   |
| NEW MOON—III . . . . .                  | 21   |
| THE CHESTNUT-BLOSSOM . . . . .          | 22   |
| THE MAID AND HER MOTHER . . . . .       | 23   |
| AT THE PIT-HEAD . . . . .               | 24   |
| HE AND SHE . . . . .                    | 25   |
| BLACK-COUNTRY NIGHT . . . . .           | 26   |
| THE RAGGED BIRK . . . . .               | 27   |
| SALLY BLACK AND GEORDIE GREEN . . . . . | 29   |
| THREE . . . . .                         | 31   |

|   | PAGE |
|---|------|
| THE WISHING-WELL . . . . .                  | 32   |
| THE PARROT . . . . .                        | 33   |
| THE BAT . . . . .                           | 34   |
| ANNABEL ROSE AND JEREMIAH FAIRLEY . . . . . | 35   |
| A.B. . . . .                                | 37   |
| THE CONCERTINA . . . . .                    | 38   |
| THE HAND . . . . .                          | 39   |
| CLIP-CLOPCLOP . . . . .                     | 40   |
| GIRL'S SONG . . . . .                       | 41   |
| DROWNED AT SEA . . . . .                    | 42   |
| THE PROMISE . . . . .                       | 43   |
| THE WEAZEL . . . . .                        | 44   |
| TARRAGONA . . . . .                         | 46   |
| KATHERINE VEITCH . . . . .                  | 47   |
| WATTY LEE AND YOUNG DICK . . . . .          | 48   |
| THE MASTER . . . . .                        | 50   |
| WHY WON'T YOU STAY? . . . . .               | 51   |
| MOTHER AND MAID . . . . .                   | 52   |
| DOWN THE DALE . . . . .                     | 53   |
| THE RAVEN'S CROAK . . . . .                 | 54   |
| YOUNG RICHARD . . . . .                     | 55   |
| MOTHERS . . . . .                           | 57   |
| BAG-OF-BONES . . . . .                      | 58   |
| BARRACOMB . . . . .                         | 59   |
| THE CHANCE-BAIRN . . . . .                  | 61   |
| THE ESCAPE . . . . .                        | 62   |
| HAUNTED . . . . .                           | 64   |
| RACHEL REED . . . . .                       | 66   |

# CONTENTS

ix

|  | PAGE |
|--|------|
| STILLCHESTERS . . . . .                | 68   |
| I HEARD A SAILOR . . . . .             | 70   |
| GALLOW'S BANK . . . . .                | 72   |
| THE FOWLER . . . . .                   | 77   |
| " . . . AS SCARLET . . . . "           | 78   |
| THE BURIED CAMP . . . . .              | 79   |
| THE ROCKET . . . . .                   | 80   |
| STARS . . . . .                        | 81   |
| THE RIDER OF THE WHITE HORSE . . . . . | 82   |
| WHERE NEITHER MOTH NOR RUST . . . . .  | 83   |
| THE VOICE . . . . .                    | 84   |
| AUDREY . . . . .                       | 85   |
| THE WIND-BELLS . . . . .               | 86   |
| MICHAEL'S SONG . . . . .               | 87   |
| TO MICHAEL . . . . .                   | 88   |
| A GARLAND FOR JOCELYN . . . . .        | 89   |
| A CHILD'S DELIGHT . . . . .            | 92   |
| THE POOL . . . . .                     | 93   |
| THE BOAT . . . . .                     | 94   |
| THE ADDER . . . . .                    | 95   |
| IN THE BURROW . . . . .                | 96   |
| UNITY . . . . .                        | 97   |
| SABBATH . . . . .                      | 98   |
| FABLE . . . . .                        | 99   |
| PROVERB . . . . .                      | 100  |
| THE GUILLOTINE . . . . .               | 101  |
| EPITAPH . . . . .                      | 102  |
| THE PIT . . . . .                      | 103  |

|  | PAGE |
|--|------|
| IN COURSE OF TIME . . . . .              | 104  |
| PIG-IRON . . . . .                       | 105  |
| LABOUR-IN-VAIN . . . . .                 | 106  |
| THE PURPLE ORCHIS . . . . .              | 108  |
| THE SAIL . . . . .                       | 109  |
| ALL BEING WELL . . . . .                 | 110  |
| IN THE WOOD . . . . .                    | 111  |
| BURIED LOVE . . . . .                    | 112  |
| THE DARK GLEN . . . . .                  | 113  |
| NO BARREN FLAME . . . . .                | 114  |
| SURVIVAL . . . . .                       | 115  |
| HEWER OF WOOD . . . . .                  | 116  |
| BEAUTY FOR ASHES . . . . .               | 117  |
| THE PARTING . . . . .                    | 118  |
| THE DISASTER . . . . .                   | 119  |
| THE MOSS . . . . .                       | 120  |
| YOUNG MAN CATCHESIDE AND OLD MAN JOBLING | 121  |
| THE LITTLE RED CALF . . . . .            | 123  |
| THE BED AT THE INN . . . . .             | 124  |
| THE STONES . . . . .                     | 125  |
| THE QUARRY . . . . .                     | 127  |
| THE PEARL . . . . .                      | 128  |
| THE TOLL . . . . .                       | 129  |
| NORTHERN SPRING . . . . .                | 130  |
| THE UNDYING FIRE . . . . .               | 132  |
| OUTWARD BOUND . . . . .                  | 133  |



## OTHERS



## LUCK

*WHAT bring you, sailor, home from the sea—  
Coffers of gold and of ivory ?*

When first I went to sea as a lad  
A new jack-knife was all I had :

And I've sailed for fifty years and three  
To the coasts of gold and of ivory :

And now at the end of a lucky life,  
Well, still I've got my old jack-knife.

## THE ANNIVERSARY

THE clicking of the latch,  
Then the scratch  
Of a match  
In the darkness and a sudden spurt of flame—

And I saw you standing there  
All astare  
In the flare,  
And I stepped to meet you, crying on your  
name.

But the match went out, alack,  
And the black  
Night came back  
To my heart, as I recalled with sudden fear

How upon your dying bed  
You had said  
That the dead  
Return to haunt the faithless once a year.



## THE WHITE WHIPPET

SQUATTED on their hunkers at the corner of  
the street  
Outside the Pouter Pigeon a knot of pit-  
men sat  
Waiting for the doors to open, cursing the  
raw sleet,  
Or muttering with husky throats dully of  
this and that :

When suddenly within the ring of the  
street-lamp's gusty flame,  
Out of the stormy shadows of the black  
November night,  
Like a little slip of moonshine a snow-white  
whippet came  
And stayed one breathless moment before  
their startled sight.

Speechless they gazed upon her as she stood  
with lifted paw,  
Clean-limbed, with quivering muzzle and  
jetty eyes agleam,  
Nor heard the doors swing open wide as  
each lad looked with awe  
One moment on the vision of his own  
heart's secret dream.

## THE NEW OILSKINS

*AND him, in his new oilskins, too !*  
Was all she said  
When up the brae and to her door  
We bore her dead.

We laid the corpse the sea had stripped  
Upon the bed,  
And left the widow to her watch  
Beside the dead.

*And him, in his new oilskins, too !*  
Was all she said :  
Yet when we sailed again at dawn  
The wife was dead.

## THE SACRIFICE

HE slipped aside  
The white-hot slide  
And gazed upon the bubbling steel :  
And stood astare  
Until the glare  
Had blinded him, and like a wheel  
With white-hot fellow sparking red  
His brain was turning in his head.

Night after night  
He'd watched that white  
And bubbling hell-broth seethe and boil :  
His wits had fed  
The furnace red  
Till now, at last released from toil,  
He shrivelled up without a whine  
Before the fire-god's glowing shrine.

## THE WRECK

SHE broke amidships : as the hull  
Parted, the boxes from the hold  
Poured crashing out, and she went down  
Into a sea of ruddy gold :

And in a twinkling I was dropped  
Into the swallow and the strife  
Of surf, to battle in a swirl  
Of floating oranges for life.



## THE COLT

THE colt kicked his heels in the air  
And rolled in the dew,  
As dandy and devil-may-care  
I went out to woo.

Hock-deep in the mire and the muck  
He stood in the rain,  
As dowly and down on my luck  
I crept home again.

My heart when I set out to woo  
Was a colt in the sun,  
But a drookit and draggie-tailed screw  
When the wooing was done.

## THE BLIND-WORM

WHEN I stroked his cold dry skin,  
His black tongue flickered out and in.

*Flicker your black tongue three times three  
If my true love is safe at sea.*

I stroked him thrice and thrice, and then  
I stroked his cold skin twice again :

And each time out the quick tongue came,  
And flickered like a wee black flame.

At three times three, my fingers shook :  
I shut my eyes, afraid to look ;

And when I opened them the snake  
Had vanished in the withered brake.

## ADRIFT

WE heaved the body overboard—  
The tenth man who had died :  
Then gasping side by side  
Askance each other eyed.

The sea was glass, the sky was brass—  
The boat a white-hot grid  
Beneath that brazen lid  
As to the thwarts we slid

Each eyeing still the other, each  
Knowing the other knew  
The one thought of the two—  
Who should heave over who ?

Which of the twain left out of twelve  
On that dead sea accurst  
Should first give in and first  
Fall to the fiend of thirst ?

Which of the twain be left to heave  
A corpse of skin and bone  
O'erboard to sink like stone ;  
And then drop back alone

Yet living to the thwarts, alone  
On blistering boards to lie  
Unburied 'neath that sky  
Of brass, eternally

Thirsting for bottomless long draughts  
Of home-brewed bitter beer,  
Icy and amber-clear . . .  
The barmaid holds so near,

So near the lips, then snatches back  
Just as you stoop to drink,  
And lets fall with a clink  
And splash into the sink . . .

When suddenly his eyes burned red :  
He rose and with a cry  
Plunged overboard, and I,  
Who somehow could not die,

Was left—to come once more to port . . .  
And in my bed again  
Heave over ten dead men  
Night after night, and then

Watch jealously again while he  
Dives headlong—mad to leap  
With him into death's deep  
And everlasting sleep !

## NED NIXON AND HIS MAGGIE

*Will you come with me, Maggie, to Stagshaw  
Bank Fair?*

Come with you where—come with you  
where?

Do you fancy a lass has naught better to do  
Than to go gallivanting, Ned Nixon, with  
you?

*If you come with me, Maggie, I'll buy you  
a ring.*

You'll do no such thing—you'll do no such  
thing.

Do you fancy I'd let my lad squander his  
pence

On tokens and trinkets and such-like  
nonsense?

*Come, Maggie, come, Maggie, we're only once  
young!*

Now hold your fool's tongue—now hold  
your fool's tongue!

If we're only young once it behoves us to be  
A common-sense couple and act cannily.

*Time enough, Maggie, for sense when we're old.*  
Does copper turn gold—does copper turn  
gold,  
Or a guff turn wiseacre at three-score-and-  
ten?  
Anyhow, I'm for taking no chances with men.

*Then must I go lonesome to Stagshaw Bank  
Fair?*  
What do I care—what do I care?  
But if you go lonesome I'd have you to  
know  
It's lonesome the rest of your life you  
will go.



## DEAD MAN'S BROW

As for the first time over Dead Man's Brow  
That snell November day I drove the share  
The coulter struck a stone that checked the  
    plough,  
Tilting it upright with the hafts in air.

With arms well-nigh out of their sockets  
    jerked  
I tried to drag the handles down in vain ;  
Then, stooping, long with breaking back I  
    worked  
To free the coulter, till with thews astrain

At length I lifted a huge slab that lay  
Lid-fashion on a kist of up-edged stones,  
Uncovering to the light and air of day  
A huddled skeleton of ash-grey bones.

With knee-joints drawn up to its jowl, it  
    clasped  
Its bony arms about its ribs, and seemed  
To shudder from the icy east that rasped  
My living cheek ; and as the chill light  
    gleamed

Upon its flawless teeth of fleckless white  
The girning skull gaped at me with a groan—  
*Why have you broken in upon the night?*  
*Why can't you let a buried man alone?*

*This thousand-year I've lain in dreamless rest,  
Forgetful of the wind that flicked my blood  
And roused the hunting hunger in my breast  
To course the fells and ford the brawling flood*

*Of burns that thundered in a winter spate,  
Questing a quarry that for ever fled  
Beyond the further fell-top, until fate  
Tripped me and tumbled me among the dead;*

*And I at last knew peace and slept secure  
Within my quiet little house of stones.  
Must I another doom of life endure?  
Why have you waked the hunger in my bones?*

I dropped the slab; and took the hafts and  
turned  
My team, and made back homewards with  
my plough,  
Leaving the hunter to the rest he'd earned  
Beneath the windy bent of Dead Man's  
Brow.

## THE ROSE

STANDING on the hot white quay  
With her hands upon her hips,  
Gaily she glanced down at me,  
A red rose between her lips.

As I looked up from the stern  
Suddenly that rose's red  
In my blood began to burn  
Till a fire was in my head,

And that hair as black as night  
Up against the blazing blue,  
And those jet eyes sparking bright  
And that red rose slowly drew

All my very heart's blood out :  
And I followed in a spell  
When she smiled and turned about—  
But I caught the rose's smell

As my lips to hers drew near :  
And I paused . . . and stood again  
With my arms round my own dear  
By a rosebush in the rain.

Vanished was that hot white quay  
In a garden's rainy gloam  
As my heart came back to me  
On the rose's breath of home.

## NEW MOON

### I

NEW moon, *he said*—the first  
I've ever seen through glass :  
Well, let us hope the worst  
Won't come to pass.

A when new moons I've seen,  
For I am ninety-three,  
And never aught between  
The moon and me.

She's bonnie still, *said he*,  
Though something sharp and cold.  
We'll see what we shall see  
When she is old.

## NEW MOON

### II

A skirling squeaky piping—  
Tweedledee, tweedledee,  
And the drubbing of a drum,  
Tum . . . tum . . .  
And the niggers on the quay  
Stole my young heart from the sea ;  
And I leapt ashore and shuffled with them,  
Ruffled with them, scuffled with them,  
Prancing to that piping—  
Tweedledee, tweedledee,  
To the piping sharp and thin  
That gets underneath the skin,  
And the drubbing of the drum,  
Tum . . . tum . . .  
That rumbles through the midriff like the  
roll of kingdom-come—  
Tum . . . tum . . . tum . . .

And I couldn't face my messmates  
When they'd seen me foot it there  
To the drubbing of the drum—  
Tum . . . tum . . .

Galumphing like a bear  
Mother-naked to the air  
With a lot of fantee stumping niggers,  
Clumping belly-thumping niggers—  
Lost to England, Home, and Beauty  
By the piping sharp and thin  
That gets underneath the skin,  
And the drubbing of the drum—  
Tum . . . tum . . .  
That rumbles through the midriff like the  
roll of kingdom-come—  
Tum . . . tum . . . tum . . .



## NEW MOON

### III

Night without a break  
Brooded overhead  
As we lay awake  
On our bracken-bed.

So I shut my eyes,  
Burdened by the weight  
Of those starless skies  
And our luckless fate.

But as I lay still  
She sat up in bed :  
*Turn your coppers, Bill—*  
*The new moon !* she said.

## THE CHESTNUT-BLOSSOM

THE chestnut-blossom fell  
In the dark waters of the well  
As, crouching on the coping-stone, he  
    hearkened  
To catch the first note of the passing-bell.

*The blossom, white and red,  
Floats lightly where it falls, he said—  
But there are drowning deeps in those dark  
    waters  
For him who plunges boldly without dread.*

*One passing-bell, said he—  
One bell shall serve for her and me,  
To speed our souls upon their way together  
Through the dark portals of eternity.*

But, even as he dreamed,  
Thicklier the falling blossom streamed  
Down the well-shaft and, settling on the  
    water,  
Like the white body of his love it seemed :

And, shot with sudden dread  
As the first note boomed overhead,  
He shrank from plunging through that drift  
    of blossom,  
And home, with fingers in his ears, he fled.

## THE MAID AND HER MOTHER

*HARK to the curlew  
Whistling down the syke!  
Curlew—curlew?  
Who ever heard the like!  
What bird may it be, then?  
Never any bird  
Whistled will you walk with me  
That ever I heard.*

*Who can it be, then,  
Whistling down the syke?  
Some lonely laddie  
Behind the stell-dyke.  
What shall I answer?  
Bless you, my bird,  
No lassie ever questioned  
That ever I heard.*

## AT THE PIT-HEAD

BLACK was his face  
With the dust of the pit,  
But bright as hot coals  
His eyes burned in it

The first time I felt  
His gaze fixed on me,  
And wondering turned  
Half-frightened to see

The fire of his heart  
That paled the sunshine  
Blazing out of the eyes  
That looked into mine

Till an answering flame  
In my bosom was lit  
By those eyes burning out  
From the mirk of the pit.

## HE AND SHE

COME, give me your answer :  
You know that I love you true.  
*Pluck me a speedwell,*  
*And happen I'll answer you.*

A speedwell ! How should I  
Know one from another bloom ?  
*You must wait for your answer,*  
*Then, till the day of doom.*

*You can't pick a speedwell,*  
*And yet you've a fancy you*  
*Can choose out a maiden ?*  
And wed her and all, I do !

Though happen I mayn't know  
One bloom from another bloom—  
It's now for your answer,  
And this be the day of doom.

## BLACK-COUNTRY NIGHT

SUDDENLY the hiss of steam  
In the quiet of the night—  
And I wake to watch the gleam  
Of the leaping furnace-light.

I have barely dropped asleep,  
Barely for a breath forgot  
The hot blasts of hate that keep  
Anger in my heart still hot,

When that hissing in the dark,  
Like the night deriding me,  
Blows to blaze the smouldering spark—  
To a glare that instantly

Fills the cauldron of my brain ;  
And I rise to pace the room  
Till the labouring day again  
Calls me with the buzzer's boom.

## THE RAGGED BIRK

You have come back ?—he said.

*I have come back.*

Tell me, is someone dead,

That you wear black ?

Where have you been, my son—

Come, tell me where ?

Life's now but little fun,

Tied to a chair

Brooding the whole day long

On days gone by

When I was young and strong—

I, even I !

Speak, lad, and tell me now

Where you have been ?

*Over the Dead Man's Brow*

*To Birkshaw Green.*

Did John go with you, too ?

*Ay, he was there.*

Walking, the two of you,

Taking the air ?



Well to be young, my lad,  
Tramping the heather—  
Can't I just see you, gad,  
Chattering together,

Careless and free and gay,  
You and your brother!  
*Little we found to say,  
One to the other.*

What, you've not quarrelled, Ben?  
*Quarrelled? Nay, dad!*  
Where have you left him, then—  
Quick, tell me, lad?

Where is my younger son?  
*Under the birk.*  
The birk? *Ay, the ragged one  
Hard by the kirk.*

Left him, my little Jack,  
There in the night?  
And he—does he, too, wear black?  
*Nay, he wears white.*

SALLY BLACK AND GEORDIE  
GREEN

Oh, where may you be going with your  
black mare sleeked so shinily,  
With her four hoofs newly-varnished and her  
feathers combed so clean,  
With her mane and tail straw-plaited, pranked  
so gay and smart and nattily  
With red and yellow ribbons tied in love-  
locks, Geordie Green?

*I be going to the Fair  
With my mare.*

Then won't you take me with you, for I've  
never been to Stagshaw Bank,  
Nor a hiring nor a hopping, though I'm  
nearly seventeen,  
And I've never had a fairing, faldalal nor  
whigmaleerie nor  
A red and yellow ribbon for my lovelocks,  
Geordie Green?

*I can't manage but one mare  
At the Fair.*

Now what can you be fearing, and I but a  
young lassie, too,  
And you, a lad of twenty? But if so it be  
you're mean,  
I've saved up thirteen pennies, so no need to  
fear I'll beggar you  
Or be beholden to you for one farthing,  
Geordie Green.  
*I'll be getting to the Fair  
With my mare.*

Then gan your gait and luck to you at Stag-  
shaw Bank, your mare and you ;  
But maybe you'll be rueing when you see  
me like a queen  
In Farmer Dodd's new dogcart with the  
shafts and spokes picked out with red  
Overtake you on the road there and flash by  
you, Geordie Green.  
*Yet I'll happen reach the Fair  
With my mare.*

### THREE

THREE whaups rose from the moss  
As I came by,  
And, whistling, wheeled across  
The darkening sky.

Three hoolets from the fern  
Flew silently,  
And vanished down the burn  
In front of me.

And, stumbling through the gloam,  
My heart's adread  
For three I left at home  
Hapt safe in bed.

## THE WISHING-WELL

LASS, I've heard tell  
That in this well  
The Roman folk would chuck,  
When things were going ill with them,  
A coin or so for luck.

*And their great Wall's a ruin on the fell,  
And naught of their camp living but this well !*

Ay, lass, that's so ;  
And yet although  
Their rampart could not stand,  
Who knows but luck meant getting back  
Again to their own land ?

*So, you've chucked our last copper in the well ?  
Well, what luck is or isn't, who can tell !*

## THE PARROT

LONG since I'd ceased to care  
Though he should curse and swear  
The little while he spent at home with me :  
And yet I couldn't bear  
To hear his parrot swear  
The day I learned my man was drowned  
at sea.

He'd taught the silly bird  
To jabber word for word  
Outlandish oaths that he'd picked up at sea ;  
And now it seemed I heard  
In every wicked word  
The dead man from the deep still cursing  
me.

A flood of easing tears,  
Though I'd not wept for years,  
Brought back old long-forgotten dreams  
to me,  
The foolish hopes and fears  
Of the first half-happy years  
Before his soul was stolen by the sea.

## THE BAT

SHE dreamed she lay in frozen fear,  
Yet living, in the icy tomb . . .  
And wakened in the dark to hear  
A bat flit-flitter round her room.

Unseen in the cold pitchy night  
It circled swiftly overhead  
Unceasingly in frightened flight,  
Till, as she quaked upon her bed,

Too overcome with fear to stir,  
One icicle from head to feet,  
The flit-flit-flitter seemed to her  
The flurry of her own heart's beat—

Her young heart flying round and round  
Imprisoned in its own despair—  
The stone-cold chamber underground  
With no escape to light and air,

No window to the sun, no door  
To winds that call the wanderer,  
Where she must dwell for evermore  
Since life had broken faith with her.

## ANNABEL ROSE AND JEREMIAH FAIRLEY

WHY did you call me, Jeremiah Fairley—  
Why did you call me as I went by?  
Never had the blackbird sung more rarely,  
Never had the sun shone brighter in the sky  
Than when I heard you calling, crying on  
my name,  
And into my young heart the strange trouble  
came.

*Why did you answer me, Annabel Rose?*  
Goodness gracious only knows!  
*Annabel Rose, you're speaking true,*  
*And that is just my answer too.*

Why did you marry me, Jeremiah Fairley?  
Why did you carry me home to your farm?  
Bleak blows the wind and the sun shines  
rarely,  
And little care you now if I should come to  
harm.

Why did you marry me and give me your  
name  
To bring me to trouble and sorrow and  
shame?

*Why did you come with me, Annabel Rose?*  
Goodness gracious only knows!  
*Annabel Rose, you're speaking true,*  
*And that is just my answer too.*



Why must a young lass be such a featherhead  
To trip to the beck and nod of any man?

*Life's never been all lying on a featherbed  
For any farm-wife since the world began.*

Why should a lass, then, unless she is mad,  
Give up her freedom to drudge for any lad?

*What's the use of asking, Annabel Rose?*

Goodness gracious only knows!

*Annabel Rose, you're speaking true,  
And that is just my answer too.*

A.B.

*I'VE done with the sea*, he said  
Each time he came ashore ;  
But ever before the month was out  
With empty pocket Melchisedek Prout  
Signed on for one trip more.

And nothing at all he said  
When it came to sink or swim :  
It warn't for the likes of an old A.B.  
To say that he was done with the sea  
Till the sea was done with him.

## THE CONCERTINA

THE twangling of a zither  
And the thin  
Tinkle of a mandolin  
With the plunking of guitars  
Underneath the Naples stars  
Is a pretty sort of music to while away a  
night  
With delight :  
But a concertina playing in a pub at  
Hartlepool  
For a devil-rousing racket can put the lot to  
school.

If I'd only stayed at Naples  
Evermore  
In that café by the shore,  
Listening to the pretty tunes  
Of Italian pantaloons,  
I'd still have hopes of glory and a mansion in  
the sky  
By-and-by :  
But the devil in his tangles took and tripped  
me like a fool  
When he played a concertina in a pub at  
Hartlepool.

## THE HAND

THIS hand, *Tod said*—you see this hand,  
Four fingers and a thumb . . .  
It's difficult to understand . . .  
And Dan, in kingdom-come !

A hand like any other hand—  
The very same that he  
Gripped when he came, the first to land  
After ten months at sea.

It's difficult to understand,  
Now that Dan's lying dead,  
That it's still plump and brown, my hand  
That should be shrunk and red !

## CLIP-CLOPCLOP

CLIP-CLOPCLOP, clip-clopclop—  
The overstepping mare,  
And Farmer Hogg comes here again :  
But I—what do I care?

While Dicky sports a spanking cob  
That canters light as air,  
I'll never wed a man that drives  
An overstepping mare.

## GIRL'S SONG

I WAS so happy that I hardly knew it,  
Nor ever guessed that life was not all play,  
And little dreamt I'd live to see the dawning  
Of such a day—  
Oh why, why should it be  
That suddenly  
Life should seem strange and terrible to me ?

I'd never cared for lads like other lasses  
Nor heeded overmuch what they might say,  
And little dreamt I'd live to see the dawning  
Of such a day—  
Oh why, why should it be  
That suddenly  
A lad's word should mean life and death  
to me ?

## DROWNED AT SEA

His fathers sleep in steadfast graves  
Under the unadventurous mould ;  
But him, who for the salt sea sold  
His birthright, still the vagrant waves  
In endless vagabondage hold.

Not his the kindly sleep of earth  
Who ever scorned the soil in life :  
Tied to no spot by bairns and wife,  
Sea-called and chosen from his birth,  
He keeps the way of salty strife :

Far from the quiet fields of home  
Where all his folk clod-cumbered lie,  
On tossing crests when winds are high  
His spirit rides through crashing foam  
And whistles to the whistling sky.

## THE PROMISE

FAINT as a watch's tick,  
As Kate stood by the sea,  
She seemed to hear his pick  
Tapping unceasingly  
In the dark workings of the pit  
To earn the price of brat and bit.

She watched the light wind whisk  
The curd from creaming waves  
And glancing waters glisk  
And glint in hanging caves,  
While in her heart she heard the sound  
Of Robert hewing underground.

And as she stood adream,  
Her young heart keeping beat  
With his in that dark seam  
Fathoms beneath her feet,  
Haze-gazing on the unseen tide,  
She felt a new pulse in her side—

The pulse of waking life  
That promised he and she  
Not merely man and wife  
Ever again should be,  
Since now into their coil of cares  
Came a small heart to beat with theirs.



## THE WEAZEL

A STREAK of red, the weazel shot  
Into the Gallows Wood :  
I heard a dying rabbit squeal,  
And for a moment stood

Uncertain—then, as by some spell,  
Drawn in through briar and thorn,  
I followed in the weazel's track,  
By clutching brambles torn.

Blindly I followed till I came  
To a clearing in the fir ;  
Then startled suddenly I stopped  
As my glance lit on her—

The strapping red-haired tinker-wench  
Who stood with hands on hips,  
And watched me with defiant eyes  
And parted panting lips.

At first I only saw her eyes,  
Her lips, her hair's fierce red :  
And then I saw the huddled man  
Who at her feet lay dead.

She saw I saw, yet never blenched,  
But still looked straight at me  
With parted lips and steady eyes,  
And muttered quietly—

*I'll go : no need to make a fuss,  
Though you've come gey and quick :  
You must have smelt the blood—and so  
The hangman takes the trick !*

*But what care I, since I am free  
Of him and all his lies,  
Since I have stopped his dirty tongue  
And shut his sneaky eyes.*

*What matter though I kick my heels  
In air for settling Jim ?  
The vermin's dead : at least I'll make  
A cleaner end than him.*

## TARRAGONA

BEFORE the *Tarragona* came  
I'd never even heard her name,  
Nor dreamt what it would mean to me  
When she again put out to sea.

Before the *Tarragona* came  
No one might breathe a word of blame  
Of me, or look askance at me,  
Since I was born beside the sea.

Now day and night the bitter name  
Sounds in my ear the word of shame,  
And *Tarragona* means to me  
The false heart of the fickle sea.

## KATHERINE VEITCH

HE fell at Loos: and when she heard  
The tidings, though she did not stir,  
Some light within her at the word  
Was darkened, and it seemed to her  
Death sought to snatch her bairn from her—  
To snatch her sucking babe from her:

And she forgot that he had grown  
A hefty lad to be her pride,  
A shepherd for skilled piping known  
Throughout the hilly Borderside  
Until death took him from her side,  
No more to seek his minney's side.

By day or night she cannot rest—  
Stravaging over Auchopecairn  
She clutches to her naked breast  
An old clout-dolly like a bairn,  
And moans—*My bairn, my hinney bairn!*  
*Death shall not have my wee bit bairn!*

## WATTY LEE AND YOUNG DICK

Now where may you be gadding to with  
such a dandy buttonhole—

If my eyes do not deceive me it's a sweetheart-  
picotee,

And in your Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes  
and bowler hat and all?

*I'm going to Saint Andrew's Church, as surely  
you might see,*

*Watty Lee.*

Ay, maybe!

Though it's well enough on Sundays for the  
folk who've got naught else to do,

The church on weekday mornings is no place  
for you or me

Who've got our bread and cheese to earn;  
so what can you be after, Dick?

*I'm going to be married there, as surely you  
might see,*

*Watty Lee.*

Ay, maybe!

WATTY LEE AND YOUNG DICK 49

Then you don't know where you're going,  
Dick, for all your dandy buttonhole,

No more than any other lad who sports a  
picotee

And dons his Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes  
and bowler hat and all.

*You're surely hard of hearing or your wits are  
all at sea,*

*Watty Lee.*

Ay, maybe!

## THE MASTER

NIGH to the window-sill the snow  
Had drifted when 'twas time to go,  
And, lifted shoulder-high, we bore  
The master from Starkacre door.

His wellbeloved fields in snow  
Were shrouded when 'twas time to go,  
And in the shieling snug and warm  
His flock was sheltered from the storm.

Stormbound and blinded by the snow  
Nor sheep nor pasture saw him go,  
Although his whole heart's hopes and fears  
Had been bound up in them for years.

Indifferent to the driving snow  
He went when it was time to go,  
And yet it's hard to think that he  
Left flock and field indifferently.

## WHY WON'T YOU STAY?

*Why won't you stay at home with me?*  
How the devil should I know, mother?  
I've never wanted to go to sea,  
And yet, and yet, somehow or other . . .

*Why won't you stay at home with me?*  
How the devil should I know, lass?  
I've never wanted to go to sea,  
Yet, somehow, when I've had a glass . . .

*Why won't you stay at home with me?*  
How the devil should I know, wife?  
I've never wanted to go to sea,  
Yet, somehow, I've signed on for life.



## MOTHER AND MAID

AND where be you stravaging to at such an  
hour of night?

*To look on Allen Water in the full moonlight.*

Go your wilful ways then ; but you will learn  
too soon

That no good comes to any lass from looking  
on the moon.

And where be you stravaging to at this  
unearthly hour?

*To hearken to the hoolet that hoots by Staward  
Tower.*

Round the Peel at midnight the brags and  
horneys prowl,

And no good comes to any lass from listening  
to the owl.

So don't say I've not warned you whatever  
may betide.

*And what should I be fearing with Robert at  
my side?*

What should you be fearing? Since the  
world began

No good has come to any lass from walking  
with a man.

## DOWN THE DALE

*NANNIE'S going down the dale—*  
Peter fleered as I went by.  
Meaning soon I'd come to lie  
In the graveyard by the Swale.

Hearing him I just stopped dead,  
Turned and eyed him up and down  
From the toecap to the crown,  
But no single word I said.

Peter's years were just three score  
Short of mine—a likely lad :  
Yet, while I've the health I had,  
Peter Perkins is no more.

To a scrag of skin and bone  
Dwining like a body curst,  
Peter reached the dalefoot first,  
Overtaking the old crone.

## THE RAVEN'S CROAK

*THE raven, he croaks on the cairn—*  
A wife had a bairn ;  
And the bairn was her heart's delight  
From morning till night :  
But when he grew up, with a knife  
He let out her life ;  
And they took him and strung him on high  
To dance in the sky,  
Then cut down the corpse, and a cairn  
Built over her bairn—  
Ay, buried his mother's delight  
In the dead of the night :  
And naught but a rackle of bones  
Lies under the stones.

*So the old raven croaks on the cairn  
As I dandle my bairn.*

## YOUNG RICHARD

SLICING the swedes for the steers  
At the blink of the light,  
Young Richard remembers with tears  
The luck of last night—

Last night when he put to the test  
His dream of a home,  
And poured out the love of his breast  
At the fall of the gloam—

To the spurting of milk in the pail  
In the dusk of the byre,  
Poured into Meg's ears the whole tale  
With bosom afire ;

Then waited, with blood running cold,  
For a token of grace ;  
When the lass looked up brazen and bold  
And laughed in his face ;

And he flinched from the flick of her mirth  
As a colt from the lash—  
His golden dream crumbled to earth,  
A heap of cold ash :

And he wandered the whole night forlorn  
By braeside and slack  
Till the first chilly glint of the morn  
Brought day's labour back.

And now as he slices the swedes  
It seems that the knife  
Cuts clean through his heart, and it bleeds  
A torrent of life—

A torrent of hot life unstayed ;  
Yet the quivering flesh  
Re-knits, that each fall of the blade  
May cleave it afresh.

## MOTHERS

OF her calf bereft,  
All night long she lows :  
Of her firstling joy  
Born of anguished throes  
Naught to her is left.

Six sweet days of bliss  
Swelled her heart with pride  
While her baby boy  
Nuzzled her warm side,  
All to end in this—

Hollow echoing night,  
One long empty ache  
Moaning sleeplessly :  
And I lie awake  
Praying that the light

Of the morrow's morn  
Bring to her the rest  
Still denied to me,  
Since from out my breast  
My first love was torn.

## BAG-OF-BONES

A BAG-OF-BONES with nodding head  
I met at Tavernspite.  
*You're old for travelling, I said,  
Although you travel light.*

*I travel light enough, my son,  
Though roads be stiff and steep,  
Since my twelve children one by one  
Have cried themselves to sleep,*

*And my old woman took to bed  
A year come Christmas night.  
With neither kith nor kin, he said,  
An old man travels light.*

## BARRACOMB

IN the dead man's bed I lay  
Longing for the break of day—  
Light enough for me to rise  
And feast the first time eager eyes  
On the pastures broad and fair  
That had fallen to my share  
As my uncle's only heir.

Last night in the wintry gloam  
I had come to Barracomb :  
Never in my life before  
Had I opened the front door,  
Never crossed the threshold-stone—  
I who hadn't even known  
The old man who'd lived alone

Reckless of his kin till death  
Laid him low and choked his breath,  
Forcing him to let his lands  
Pass into a stranger's hands—  
Forcing him to leave his home  
High on windy Barracomb  
For a lodging in the loam.



In the wide and creaky bed  
All night long I'd tossed, my head  
Filled with plans of all I'd do  
Now good fortune had come true,  
And the wealth he'd held so fast  
In his miser-grip at last  
Into better hands had passed :

When, as I lay there wide-eyed,  
Someone seemed to quit my side,  
Though all night alone I'd lain ;  
And against the window-pane  
Stood a ghostly form and grey  
Peering out across the brae  
For the first chill glint of day.

Stark with dread I lay astare  
Watching that strange shadow there,  
Dark against the kindling sky ;  
And my blood ran cold as I  
Wondered if that shape might be  
The ghost of old John Heatherly  
Or my own fetch awaiting me.

## THE CHANCE-BAIRN

THE corbie and the kestrel  
Are robbers to all the rest,  
But the corbie gives chase to the kestrel  
That hovers too near his nest  
When fatherhood's fierce tenderness  
Kindles the corbie's breast.

The corbie and the kestrel  
Are robbers to all the rest—  
But better for you, my sorrow,  
Sucking my bitter breast,  
Better for you had you been born  
In the fierce corbie's nest.

## THE ESCAPE

TOOTHLESS, lanthorn-jawed and bald,  
Bent and hobbling on two sticks,  
Helpless by his burning ricks  
Old Jake Jackson raged and called—  
Bawled and called in vain for help :  
All his hands were at the fair  
Junketing, and none was there  
To hear or heed his frantic yelp  
As he watched the thirsty flame  
Lapping up his golden wheat,  
Till at last the glare and heat  
His old senses overcame,  
And he flung away his sticks—  
Nimble as a two-year-old  
Leapt into the roaring gold  
And perished with his burning ricks.

When they came back from the fair  
All in vain for him they called,  
Round the steading searched and bawled—  
Could not find him anywhere—  
Bawled and called for him in vain :  
Ricks and man were smouldering ash  
Sizzling in the sudden splash  
Of a burst of thunder-rain.

Though they raked the ashes through,  
Of their master they found naught :  
So the coffin he had bought  
Second-hand, as good as new,  
And beneath his bed had kept,  
Was no bargain after all ;  
And the grave-plot by the wall  
Nigh where his forefathers slept,  
He'd long rented, wasted too !  
Not for him in clammy gloom  
To await the crack of doom,  
Seeped and sodden through and through  
In the sour and wormy mould  
Where his outstripped kinsmen lie—  
He the first to reach the sky  
Charioted in fiery gold !

## HAUNTED

THE forepeak raked the stars  
As we drove upon the Scars,  
Then dipped into a boiling broth of hell:  
With his arms about my neck,  
I was sinking with the wreck,  
When I drew my little knife and used it  
well—

In his thrapple to the haft  
Sheathed my gully, and I laughed  
As I felt his death-grip loosen round my  
own ;  
And I struck out for the land,  
And was slung upon the strand  
By a wave that took and tossed me like a  
stone.

Stunned and senseless there I lay  
Till I roused at blink of day  
To feel a leaden burden on my chest ;  
And as I strove to rise  
I looked down into the eyes  
Of the dead man's head that lolled upon my  
breast.

Stark and staring he lay there,  
And the waves had stripped him bare  
Ere they'd flung his broken body over me :

And I rose as if in sleep,  
Howked a hole, and dark and deep  
I buried him beside the Northern sea—

Rolled a rock above his grave  
Lest a sudden scouring wave  
Should scoop his naked carcase from the  
sand:

Then I left him—so I thought—  
Dead and done with, and I sought  
Food and shelter from the people of the  
land—

Left him buried. . . . But for me  
There's no sleep by land or sea,  
For always when I'm dropping off to rest  
I am startled wide awake,  
And all night I lie and quake  
With the deadweight of a corpse upon my  
chest.

Yet never in this life  
Have I used the butcher's knife,  
Never sailed the seas nor left my native  
shore ;  
And I know not from what deep  
Stirs the doom that breaks my sleep  
To keep lykewake with the dead for ever-  
more.

## RACHEL REED

*DANCE for your daddy,  
My canny laddie,  
Dance for your mammy,  
My wee lamb. . . .*

Daylong beside the smouldering slack  
She dodders, crooning with a grin—  
Who, one wanchancy seven-night back,  
Was hale to work day out day in—

Who'd rise at the first glisk of light,  
And take no ease until the sun  
Behind Black Belling dipped from sight,  
Her long and lonesome day's darg done.

And as she singled swedes she had  
Just one thought ever in her mind—  
How one fine night her headstrong lad  
That she could neither hold nor bind

Would come again to Callerlea  
When he had had his coltish fling  
To rest beneath his own roof-tree  
Dog-weary with calleeveering.

Bone-tired she crept to bed that night  
And slumbered sound till twelve o'clock,  
Then started, listening, bolt-upright,  
Awaked by some unearthly shock.

She heard his footstep on the stair :  
She heard the clicking of the sneck :  
The door swung wide, and he stood there—  
A ghostly halter round his neck.

*Dance for your daddy,  
My canny laddie,  
Dance for your mammy,  
My wee lamb. . . .*



## STILLCHESTERS

THREE hundred years the Forsters' flocks  
    had grazed  
Stillchesters, by the ploughshare never  
    broken,  
Till the wanchancy day the word was spoken  
That gave the strangers leave to dig, and  
    raised  
The dead to trouble us and drive us crazed.

They told us that Stillchesters once had been  
A Roman camp, and that the walls yet lay  
Beneath the smooth turf buried from the day.  
Would God those broken walls still lay  
    unseen  
Beneath the kindly turf's unbroken green !

They took us with their talk of fighting men,  
Of Spanish cohorts, altars, and rich treasure,  
And so I gave them leave to have their  
    pleasure  
With my best pasture, little dreaming then  
Stillchesters never should know peace again.

It's true my poor old mother tried to warn  
Her foolish son, and looked at me sore-  
    frightened,  
But when I saw how my young wife's eyes  
    brightened

At their fine words I granted leave. The morn  
They cut the turf our only son was born.

Although till then the Forsters had been fair,  
And though his mother's hair was yellow too,  
And her bright eyes like mine a Northern  
blue,

The bairn was sallow-skinned and had dark  
hair,

And looked at us with big black eyes astare.

His mother loved her headstrong gipsy sore,  
But he was aye a changeling from that day,  
Until he broke her heart and went away  
To be a soldier, 'listing for a war  
In foreign lands, and never came back more.

Three hundred years the Forsters' flocks  
had grazed

Stillchesters, till a light word rashly said  
Unearthed old quarrels of the ancient dead,  
And some black Spaniard's restless spirit  
raised

To drive the last of all the Forsters crazed—

To drive the last of all the Forsters fey,  
Rousing the fighting fever in his blood  
Whose sires had all been shepherds since the  
Flood :

So when my time comes, as it must one day,  
Whose flocks shall graze Stillchesters, who  
can say ?

## I HEARD A SAILOR . . .

*I HEARD a sailor talking,  
As he tossed upon his bed  
In hot uneasy slumber,  
And this is what he said :*

Why does she shake her head at me  
Until her ear-rings tinkle,  
Though all the while her merry smile  
Keeps her blue eyes atwinkle ?

Why does she slyly glance at me  
As she pours out the wine,  
Then pucker up her pretty lips  
And hold them up to mine ?

Why does she suddenly draw back  
And o'er my shoulder stare ?  
Why does that silly parrot screech ?  
Why does the gas-jet flare ?

And who's the lad that's running round  
Upon the heaving floor  
With a knife betwixt his shoulder-blades—  
And cannot find the door ?

## I HEARD A SAILOR

71

Why does the scarlet parrot screech ?  
Why does the gas flare red ?  
Why do her tinkling ear-rings dance  
A horn-pipe in my head ?

## GALLOWS' BANK

LAST night, as I was stepping ben  
Just as the Abbey clock struck ten,  
My heart thrilled to the tramp of men  
That climbed the Gallows' Bank :  
And turning to the open door  
I watched them trudging, four and four,  
Breasting the brae with moonlight hoar,  
Rank after ragged rank.

Their arms against their sides were bound :  
Their mouths were gagged ; and not a sound  
Their feet made on the frozen ground  
Nor cast a shadow there,  
As up the unreturning road  
They shuffled, hobbled, limped and strode  
With eyes set on the tree that showed  
Stark in the snell night air—

The gallows' tree of stout ash-wood  
That handy on the fell-top stood  
For folk who come to little good  
Against the star-pricked sky.

Horse-copers, tinkers, thieving herds,  
And doxies flaunting fakish flerds,  
An endless gang of gallows' birds,  
I watched them wamble by—

I watched them hirple up the hill,  
Drawn up and up against their will,  
Those grey ghosts shadowless and still—  
For only in my heart  
Had echoed that tramp-tramp of feet,  
And nothing but my own heart's beat  
Had drawn me to the haunted street—  
When with a sudden start

I saw the whole rapsCALLION rout  
Each man of blood and sleiching lout  
Stop all at once and wheel about  
And fix their eyes on me :  
And as I watched, the starry skies  
And moonlit road and heathy rise  
Vanished, and naught was there but eyes  
That glowered murderously—

Hundreds of eyes that stared in mine,  
Of lads and lasses clarty-fine  
Who'd perished by the banks of Tyne  
When first it topped the fell,  
That tree new-tarred with hempen noose,  
Straw-coloured, dangling long and loose  
For any chance-come traveller's use  
To sling him slick to hell.

And then the eyes of everyone—  
The eyes of the whole gairishon,  
Each daddy's daughter, mother's son,  
Who'd danced with heels in air  
Since reivers rode the Borderside,  
And men had thieved and fought and died,  
And wenched and murdered, sneaked and  
lied—

Shrank to a single stare :

And as from out the heart of night  
Those dead eyes searched me wildfire-bright  
I looked into their murder-light  
And startled, knew, alas,  
That I was staring in my own  
Scared eyes where, frozen to the bone,  
New-risen from sleep I stood alone  
Before my looking-glass.

BEAUTY FOR ASHES





## THE FOWLER

A WILD bird filled the morning air  
With dewy-hearted song :  
I took it in a golden snare  
With meshes close and strong.

But where is now the song I heard ?  
For all my cunning art,  
I who would house a singing-bird  
Have caged a broken heart.

“ . . . AS SCARLET . . . ”

SCARLET the toadstools burn  
In black mould by the linn,  
Yet not more fiery red  
Than my soul's sin.

Sodden as last year's leaves,  
My life seemed cold and dead,  
When suddenly the black  
Burst into red.

Fall quickly winter snow  
To bury all from sight  
In drift on drift of death's  
Cold dazzling white.

## THE BURIED CAMP

FEAR not : the dead are dead,  
And fallen pomp and power  
Leave no pale ghosts to prowl  
Above their earthly bed :  
'Twas no dead Roman but a living owl  
That startled us beside the ruined tower.

*And yet, that beak, those eyes  
That blazed out from the night !  
Surely 'twas Cæsar's soul  
That with sharp stabbing cries  
Swept by, as through the buried camp we stole,  
Spurring dead cohorts on to one last fight.*

## THE ROCKET

INTO the night  
The rocket soars :  
Ah, could but I  
In flashing flight  
O'er the dull lamps  
Of earth swing high—  
One moment poise  
And perish there  
In the full blaze  
Of kindled air :  
What matter though  
A charred stick fall  
Into the night  
That swallows all.

## STARS

Who travelling through a midnight wood  
Tilts up his chin to watch the stars  
Will like enough trip over roots  
Or bark his shins against the knars:

But who, benighted in blind ways,  
Struggles to thrust close boughs apart  
Will never win from out the wood  
Unless the stars are in his heart.

## THE RIDER OF THE WHITE HORSE

CLIMBING the bridge's slope, a little lad,  
I looked up and beheld in bright sunlight,  
Against a billowing April cloud, blue-black,  
Heavy with threat of hail, a monster white  
High-stepping steed with the rider scarlet-  
clad

Like a flame-robed archangel on its back.

The spark-red nostril and the flashing eye,  
The scarlet rider in the sun afire  
Against the storm-cloud—shot with thrilling  
dread

My little heart a-hunger with desire  
Of angel visions: then, as they went by,  
I knew 'twas old Jake Dodd in hunting-red—

Jake Dodd, the whipper-in, on his white Jill.  
The sun was blotted out; the hail threshed  
down,

Scattering the glory. Jake and his old mare  
Have long been dust—yet, on the bridge's  
crown,

In the child's heart within my heart, Jake  
still

Rides, an archangel burning through the air.

WHERE NEITHER MOTH NOR  
RUST . . .

TREASURES three  
Life's given me—

Opal-Heart of dawning dreams  
Shot with restless fiery gleams :

Crystal-Heart by day and night  
Glowing with the living light :

Amber-heart that wells with mirth  
Of the sun-enchanted earth.

Every dawn's a golden key  
To unlock my treasury—  
Heaven here and now for me !



## THE VOICE

AT sunrise, swimming out to sea,  
I heard a clear voice calling me  
From the little wood whose branches lean  
Over the restless water—  
I heard, half-dreaming that I heard  
The voice of some enchanted bird;  
And glancing back, among the green  
I saw my little daughter.

When I must breast the stiller sea  
That stretches everlastingly  
Beneath the starless unknown night,  
The darkness round me falling,  
May it be given me to hear  
Life calling me as crystal-clear—  
To glance back once through failing light  
And answer that sweet calling.

## AUDREY

ON the sea's edge she dances—  
Her glistening body bare  
Amid the light foam glances,  
Foam-light with tossing hair,  
Eager for all that chances  
By land or sea or air.

She dances yet undreaming  
Of life's oncoming tide :  
Yet when wild water streaming  
Surge round her deep and wide  
Her soul foam-light and gleaming  
Shall every danger ride.

## THE WIND-BELLS

LISTENING to the glassy tinkle  
Of the painted Japanese  
Wind-bells swaying in the breeze,  
Michael sees  
Butterflies of light that twinkle  
Round the walls with golden glancing,  
Glancing, dancing to the ringing  
Of the crystal wind-bells swinging.

As he stands there listening, dreaming,  
Fairer even than the flight  
Of the butterflies of light  
Flit the bright  
Fancies in his blue eyes gleaming—  
In his happy heart a rarer,  
Rarer fairer music singing  
Than the wind-bells' crystal ringing.

## MICHAEL'S SONG

BECAUSE I set no snare  
But leave them flying free,  
All the birds of the air  
Belong to me.

From the bluetit on the sloe  
To the eagle on the height  
Uncaged they come and go  
For my delight.

And so the sunward way  
I soar on the eagle's wings,  
And in my heart all day  
The bluetit sings.

## TO MICHAEL

DEAR Crystal-Heart, I pray that you  
May do what I set out to do,  
Easily and happily attain  
What I have striven for in vain,  
All that, for some infirmity  
Of soul, life has denied to me.

May you breathe out as some blithe bird  
All that my heart awaking heard  
And laboured daylong to express  
Through cloudy passion and sharp stress  
Till gushing from its crystal spring  
Your song in all men's hearts shall sing:

And in that music clear and true  
Even I at last attain through you.

## A GARLAND FOR JOCELYN

### I

LITTLE flame that barely kindled  
Flickered low,  
Little flame that paled and dwindled  
As we watched you, grieving so,  
That the life our love had wakened  
To the dark again should go.

How we strove and strove to win you  
From the night,  
Till the baby-spirit in you  
Slowly conquered, burning bright,  
And the jealous shades were scattered,  
And our hearts were filled with light!

### II

When I think of you I see  
A flame-winged fritillary  
Glancing over daffodils.

When I think of you I hear  
Leaping laughing amber-clear  
Sun-enchanted rills.

## III

Lively as a trout,  
Flashing in and out  
The golden mesh of sunlight  
That nets the crystal river—

Darting here and there  
Through the dewy air  
My little lassie frolics  
With laughing life a-quiver.

## IV

When you dance  
Amber-bright the sunbeams glance  
In your tossing hair ;

So your name  
Calls to mind a little flame  
Dancing in the air—

Little flame for ever dancing  
In the rain-washed air of April,  
Amber flame through crystal glancing.

V

A charm of goldfinches  
That flutter and flicker  
Over daffodils flashing  
Through sunshiny showers—

The light of your laughter  
Flashes out of the silence  
Though you have been sleeping  
In dreamland for hours.



## A CHILD'S DELIGHT

TRAPS for mice and snares for birds—  
But who can take in a net of words  
Fancies in their aery flight  
To the crystal height  
Of a child's delight ?

Now a golden fount of light  
Spraying to a rainbow bright,  
Then again  
Tinkling drops of sunny rain  
That turn to flaming butterflies  
Ere they reach the earth and rise  
In a cloud of changing dyes,  
In a cloud that spans the skies  
With a fiery flickering bow  
Melting into flakes of snow  
That falling change to starry flowers—  
Flowers that from the earth take flight  
Again on wings of singing light—  
On and on through endless hours . . .

Traps for mice and snares for birds—  
But empty is my net of words.

## THE POOL

HER mind's a shallow bowl  
Round which in naked light  
The homeless goldfish glance  
Like flame in all men's sight.

Dazzled I watch, then turn  
Home-coming to the cool  
Star-haunted secrecies  
Of the dream-shadowed pool.

## THE BOAT

Two were at the oars and two,  
Trailing hands, lolled in the bow  
When the boat stole into sight  
Round Emmanuel Head just now.

The sky was one fierce flame of sun,  
The sea, a burnished glassy lake :  
No creak or splash of oars was there :  
The cleaving keel left no white wake.

I blinked a moment, my hot eyes  
Bedazzled by the blinding light :  
And when I looked about again  
The silent boat had sunk from sight.

Then fearfully my heart recalled  
How those most dear of all to me—  
The four in that phantasmal boat—  
Yet sojourned by another sea.

## THE ADDER

COILED on a hot white stone  
The adder basks  
And nothing asks  
Save to be let alone.

Yet somewhere in the ling  
An enemy  
Crawls stealthily  
To rouse him up to sting:

So he must lift his head  
Once more to fight,  
Till in the light  
He or his foe lie dead.

O heart, that you might rest,  
And naught again  
Rouse from their den  
The angers of my breast!

## IN THE BURROW

ON every hand beset  
It seems we're trapped, and yet  
Even now it's not too late  
To try and outwit fate.

Who cowers in skulking dread  
Of death's already dead?  
While there's a breath or glisk  
Of light let's take the risk.

Better to bolt and run  
And chance the random gun  
Than wait in huddled fear  
The red-eyed ferret here.

## UNITY

WHEN the cooling tyre contracts  
Round the felloe of the wheel,  
Do not spokes that once were boughs  
In close-knitting fibres feel  
A glow in being ironbound  
In unity secure and round  
For conquest of untravelled ground?

## SABBATH

LOWING of cattle as the twilight falls  
Over green pastures and still waters deep ;  
Then not a sound save where a late thrush  
calls  
Good-night to all, and turns to sleep.

Till, as I dreaming watch the moon's first  
beam  
Silver the river's smooth and silent flood,  
The cheerful Christians in their chapel  
scream—  
*There is a fountain filled with blood . . .*

## FABLE

SAID the raven to the wren :

*Why are you afraid of men ?*

*You are nothing but a craven,*

Said the raven.

While the raven still was talking,

Came a boy behind him stalking,

Caught him up and clipped his wings.

Still uncaptured Jenny sings.



## PROVERB

*THE pitcher that goes often to the well . . .*  
And where's the tragedy in what you tell?  
Better go every day for half a year  
To fetch your fill of water cool and clear  
And, brimmed with living crystal, happen  
    fall  
In shards and perish thus once and for all,  
Than stand, a dust and fly-trap, on the shelf  
For centuries with other useless delf.

## THE GUILLOTINE

OBEDIENT to the will of men  
The giant blade descends again,  
Slicing the molten steel like cheese  
Just as the grimy pigmies please :

And something makes me laugh to see  
One mass of metal quietly  
Slicing another at the will  
Of bow-legged Mike and one-eyed Bill.

## EPITAPH

DEEPLY he drank of life, and scorned  
The timid soul who sips,  
And stumbled out into the night  
With laughter on his lips.

Oh, grudge me not the like, O life,  
When I too must depart—  
A gallant stirrup-cup to warm  
The cockles of my heart!

## THE PIT

*With twinkling watery eyes and wheezily*  
*Old Peter Walker laughed*  
*And gave his chest a thump—*  
Well, if you're sick of living, you may easily  
Drop down the empty shaft,  
And lie in the black sump  
In peace till the last trump.

Yet, I've a notion, like the rest of us,  
You'll take the cage, my friend,  
For going down the pit ;  
And be as eager as the best of us  
For the night-shift to end—  
To see the last of it  
When you've been down a bit.

## IN COURSE OF TIME

THE sarsen-stone,  
Door-post of temple, altar-throne  
Of some old god, or monument  
Erected by a warrior-host  
To mark the fallen chieftain's tomb,  
In course of time has come  
To serve the old black sow for scratching-  
post.

A lad's light word,  
Breathed low and scarcely heard  
Or heeded in the babblement  
And blare of other tongues, has time  
Remembered, and the souls of men  
Again and yet again  
Take fire at that dead lad's undying rhyme.

## PIG-IRON

THE crowbars loosed the plug of clay,  
And bursting from the furnace' side  
The spouting molten metal gushed  
In a tumultuous seething tide

That surged into the winter night  
With an exultant white-hot flare  
And blinded heaven and all its stars  
And the cold moon in one fierce glare,

Till in the mould of channelled sand  
It cooled to red: then dull and slow  
It crawled in grey congealing streams  
That gradually ceased to flow :

When clinking crowbars snapped the chilled  
And brittle metal short, and soon  
In stark cold pigs the iron lay  
Rigid beneath the icy moon.

And so the passionate seething tide  
Of youth, the fury and the fire  
That burned up heaven and earth in one  
Exultant outburst of desire,

Grows dull and sluggish ; and too soon  
Shall my heart's metal, dead and cold,  
Await the crowbar's snapping stroke  
Indifferent in its channelled mould.

## LABOUR-IN-VAIN

SNELL moans the East-wind,  
Chill drizzles the rain  
Round the lone steading  
Of Labour-in-vain.

Blind are the windows  
With never a pane,  
And reckless the chimneys  
Of Labour-in-vain.

Byres empty of cattle,  
Barns empty of grain,  
And naked the roof-tree  
Of Labour-in-vain.

Yet, gaunt, peaked and sallow  
As moons on the wane,  
The ghosts of old tenants  
Haunt Labour-in-vain.

And shriller than peesweeps  
Their voices complain  
And greet for the ruin  
Of Labour-in-vain—

*Though life was one heartbreak  
Of trouble and pain,  
Would we were still living  
At Labour-in-vain.*

*Though life was a struggle,  
The stress and the strain  
Knitted our heart-strings  
To Labour-in-vain.*

*We tilled the sour acres  
And sowed the scant grain,  
And hoped for a harvest  
At Labour-in-vain.*

*And beaten and broken  
In body and brain  
We breathed our last sadly  
At Labour-in-vain.*

*In death there is nothing  
To lose or to gain,  
While at least hope was left us  
At Labour-in-vain.*

Snell moans the East-wind,  
Chill drizzles the rain  
Round the lone steading  
Of Labour-in-vain.

And shriller than peesweeps  
Their voices complain  
And greet for the ruin  
Of Labour-in-vain.



## THE PURPLE ORCHIS

You pluck the bloom to pieces with a smile,  
Chattering heedlessly the while,  
And I watch you strip the stalk  
Of its purple pride of petals as you talk ;  
And the flower that when you came  
Burst to flame  
In the sunlight of your eyes  
Petal after petal dies,  
As you pluck my heart to pieces with a  
smile,  
Chattering heedlessly the while.

## THE SAIL

A BOAT in the bay,  
You say,  
And watch with delight  
The sail flash white.

A sail in the blue  
For you,  
A sail—but for me  
My heart at sea.

## ALL BEING WELL

*ALL being well, I'll come to you,  
Sweetheart, before the year is through;  
And we shall find so much to do,  
So much to tell.*

I read your letter through and through,  
And dreamt of all we'd say and do,  
Till in my heart the thought of you  
Rang like a bell.

Now the bell tolls, my love, for you ;  
For long before the year is through  
You've gone where there is naught to do  
And naught to tell.

Yet mayn't I find when life is through  
The best is still to say and do,  
When I at last may come to you,  
All being well ?

## IN THE WOOD

THE day you came upon us in the wood  
You said no word but only glanced at me,  
And then went on to talk of something else.

How could I tell you you'd misunderstood  
When you—you said no word of it to me,  
But talked so steadily of something else?

If you had only spoken out I could  
Have told you all and you forgiven me,  
But you thought best to talk of something  
else.

Because your heart was troubled you thought  
good  
To say no word about it and spare me :  
So we must always talk of something else.

## BURIED LOVE

I HEAR your spade  
Delving the soft wet garden-mould,  
And listen half-afraid  
Lest you should chance dig up again the old  
Long-buried golden dream that died  
The day you came upon us side by side—

Lest unaware  
And only half-remembering  
You suddenly lay bare  
Your love of me that perished in the Spring,  
And only see among the stones  
A huddle of unknown time-whitened  
bones :

And so forget the heart of golden flame  
That died the night misunderstanding came.

## THE DARK GLEN

As we drop downward we shall lose the moon  
That in high heaven kept pace with us all  
night.

*What matter ? I am wearied of her light.*

Between the crags we shall not see the sun  
Kindle the fell-top with his earliest ray.

*What matter though we slumber through the  
day ?*

What, lose the golden days, the silver nights,  
For which so eagerly we climbed the steep ?

*Love, I am weary, and I long for sleep.*

Yet, rapt in slumber, we'll not even know,  
Lost in blind dreams, that we together rest.

*I only know sleep comes, and sleep is best.*

## NO BARREN FLAME

THE poppy's flame has died,  
But sprinkled far and wide  
Its seeds abide  
Another harvest-tide.

Though passion's flame sink low,  
The seeds of fire we sow  
For weal or woe  
Through time shall burn and blow.

## SURVIVAL

*If the worst comes to the worst  
We can die but once, you said ;  
Then you ventured all and first  
Took your place among the dead.*

Sound you sleep, while I who dare  
Venture naught but quailing stay  
On the quag-edge of despair  
Die a hundred deaths a day—

Die and live to die again :  
Yet it's much to know that you  
Did not venture all in vain,  
That the worst you never knew.



## HEWER OF WOOD

THE timber I have hewn, stacked high,  
Would overtop Saint Mary's spire  
That soars into the windy sky,  
Yet it has only served for fuel  
To feed one little cottage-fire—

Has only served to keep aglow  
One inglenook when winter's storm  
Raked heaven and earth with blinding  
snow—

A forest felled and life-long labour  
To keep a little household warm.

And that small fire that still devours  
Fresh timber burns my life away:  
The tale of gold and glooming hours  
Of tree and man's the selfsame story—  
Green flame, red flame and ashes grey.

## BEAUTY FOR ASHES

You may burn the golden glory of the gorse,  
But the roots into the rocky earth run deep,  
And the living bush will only glow to rarer  
    fire of beauty  
When at last beneath the mould you lie  
    asleep.

Beauty dies not though you blast and lay it  
    waste,  
Though you turn the whole earth to a cinder  
    heap,  
From the ashes of your factories once again  
    the everliving  
Shall awake one April morning out of sleep.

## THE PARTING

THERE was no reason why he should not  
smile,  
Bidding good-bye to me,  
And go his way light-heartedly—  
And yet!

There was no reason why I should not  
smile  
Happily for his sake,  
No reason why my heart should break—  
And yet!

## THE DISASTER

AGAINST the sunset's rose  
Purple the pit-heap glows—  
The mound of slate and slack  
That all day long gloomed black :

And the gaunt shaft-wheel seems  
Hub to a wheel of dreams,  
With flaming spokes that whirl  
In a celestial swirl

Of hues beneath whose fire,  
With patience naught can tire,  
Quiet, with close-shawled head,  
Each woman 'waits her dead.

## THE MOSS

*THE cold bog-water clucks  
At every step across  
The black and quaking hags  
Of Dead Man's Moss—*

And what's the hurry, squire,  
To reach the house you hate ?  
Where there's no welcome none  
Can come too late.

Why should you labour now  
To lift another foot  
When peace lies all about  
The rushes' root ?

Your empty house but holds  
The dead dream of a fool :  
But the end of all things waits  
In any pool—

In any still black pool  
Oblivion dark and deep  
Awaits the heart that would  
Forget in sleep.

## YOUNG MAN CATCHIESIDE AND OLD MAN JOBLING

*OLD man, old man, whither are you hobbling?  
Old man Jobling, whither are you going—  
Battered hat and tattered coat and clogs in need  
of cobbling—  
And the snell wind lowing and the mirk lift  
snowing?*

Young man Catchieside, and if I go afairing  
Who's declaring I'm too old for going—  
Dressed in Sunday-best and all? And why  
should I be caring  
For the snell wind lowing and the mirk lift  
snowing?

*Ay, but what will 'come of you as drifts get  
deep and deeper,  
Steep roads steeper and your shanks too numb  
for going?  
Happen I shall nap—I was ever a good  
sleeper  
With the snell wind lowing and the mirk lift  
snowing.*

*Deep will be your sleep . . .* It's truth you  
are declaring—

After fairing, whichever way we're going,  
Deep will be the sleep of all; so why should

I be caring

For the snell wind lowing and the mirk lift  
snowing?

## THE LITTLE RED CALF

THE little red calf  
For a day and a half  
Has blinked in the light—  
His blue eyes adaze  
In the buttercup-blaze,  
He fancies the world is one bright  
Fresh field, green and yellow,  
A world where a fellow  
Whatever betide  
May snuggle in safety his mother's warm  
side.

Little brother, I too  
Once fancied as you  
The world was one fair  
Fresh meadow of flowers  
Until the black hours  
Burst on me and stripped the mead bare.  
O little red brother,  
Keep close to your mother  
Whatever betide,  
And snuggle as long as you may to her side!



## THE BED AT THE INN

*NEVER*, I said,  
*Shall anything sever*  
*Hearts that are wed*  
*For ever and ever.*  
And the swinging inn-sign  
Took up the refrain,  
Creaking and squeaking  
Again and again :  
*For ever and ever—*  
*Ay, so they said,*  
*All the young lovers*  
*Who've lain on that bed.*  
*They swore the same vow,*  
*The true or false-hearted,*  
*Yet all of them now*  
*Has life or death parted,*  
*All of them parted*  
*For ever and ever—*  
*And ever new lovers*  
*Brag boldly of 'Never !'*

## THE STONES

THE plank was covered, so last night  
I had to leap the flooded burn ;  
And as I landed in the fern  
I scared an owl to startled flight.

Sharp in my ear it screeched ; its cry  
Sang through my very marrow-bones,  
Curdling my heart's blood, as the Stones  
Loomed gaunt against the starless sky.

As through my being's black unknown  
Caverns that skirl went echoing,  
My feet were drawn into the ring  
Of huddled shapes of druid-stone :

Victim of some ancestral dread,  
My gullet bared to meet the knife,  
Hanging upon the edge of life  
Over the unseen clutching dead

Crouched in the core of night, the sheer  
Primeval horror of the dark,  
I cowered—when at my feet a lark  
Rose with a twitter sweet and clear :

And as he sang the song he sings  
An hour before the break of day,  
The spell snapped, and above the brae  
My heart too soared on dewy wings.

## THE QUARRY

As the windhover  
Drops on the shrew,  
Love, O young lover,  
Swoops down on you,  
Bears your heart heavenward,  
Tears it in two ;

Swift with his capture  
Soars through the light—  
Yours the fierce rapture  
Of agonized flight,  
Talon-torn, terror-winged,  
Into blind night.

## THE PEARL

AND is this all  
You bring up from the bottom of the sea ?  
I watched you strip and poise and recklessly  
Dive headlong down, as though to wrest the  
key  
From the profundity  
Of time's unfathomable mystery—

Only a pearl,  
A little fragile globe of fleckless white,  
You bring up, breathless, in your palm  
clutched tight,  
Trinket to make a girl's eyes kindle bright—  
Naught else you bring to light  
From the dark chambers of old ocean's  
night?

*Only a pearl—  
All colour fused in one white glow, all sound  
In breathless silence blended, all form bound  
In the clean compass of the perfect round—  
Beauty, in chaos drowned,  
Borne to the living light from deeps profound !*

## THE TOLL

*Ho, ferry, ho !*  
The river is in spate :  
You cannot cross to-night.  
*Yet I must go*  
*To-night : I cannot wait*  
*Till morning light.*

Come, you too then  
Must grasp the guiding-rope  
And haul the boat with me—  
Grasp as doomed men  
Clutching at their last hope.  
*Ay, willingly !*

Before we land  
Come, pay your passage, if you'd live  
To draw another breath—  
Unloose one hand . . .  
*See, with both hands I give*  
*The full toll—death !*

## NORTHERN SPRING

O SKEIN of wild-geese, flying  
Through April's starry blue,  
Your harsh and eager crying  
Searches through and through  
My heart till it takes flight  
Arrow-like with you  
To pierce the Northern night,  
Shedding flakes of light  
From wings of flashing white  
Through tingling airs a-quiver  
On tossing waves that shiver  
Crystal berg and floe—  
On crashing ghylls and forces of winter's  
melting snow.

When down the water-courses  
The spate of April dins,  
Like hoofs of countless horses  
Thunder the threshing linns  
As leaping 'twixt the scars  
Bright froth spurts and spins  
And sprays the leafing spars

Of woods that rake the stars ;  
And shattering bonds and bars  
My spirit pours in thunder  
Of torrents, trampling under  
Dead winter's slothful dreams,  
Till life's a singing tumult of April-wakened  
streams.



## THE UNDYING FIRE

WHAT will become of you, flesh and bone,  
When I at last must leave you alone ?

*When you have left us, bird of the breast,  
Thankfully, endlessly we shall rest.  
Long have you fluttered us, urging us ever  
To ventures beyond our utmost endeavour,  
Fretting us, driving us on and on  
Until, breath failing and strength nigh gone,  
We have longed for the day when buried deep  
In the passionless earth we shall sink to sleep,  
When you shall be free to wander the air  
And we shall neither know nor care.*

Think you, poor dreamers, you shall find  
rest

Even in earth's most secret breast ?  
Know you not then that life's desire  
Has burned in the earth with a heart of fire  
Ever since out of chaos she came  
Borne on pinions of singing flame,  
And not an atom, but in hot strife  
Perishing, flares to a fuller life,  
And death that seems a dreamless sleep  
Is but life burning more fierce and deep ?

## OUTWARD BOUND

THE harbour-lights have dwindled  
To sparks on a grey shore  
Which fades into the sunset  
That we shall see no more  
Above our own land kindled.

As one by one extinguished  
The lights of home go out,  
It's time to face the onset  
Of night, to turn about—  
All thoughts of ease relinquished—

To face the whirling welter,  
And drive before the storm  
That knows not dawn nor sunset—  
Our wits to keep us warm,  
And courage our sole shelter.

**UPB**

## NOTE

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